



Career mobility from associate to full professor in academia: micro-political practices and implicit gender stereotypes

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to gain a deeper understanding of gender stereotypes in academia by examining the informal aspects of the university as an organisation. We do so by using the concept of ‘micro-political practices related to recruitment and progression in higher education institutions’. To increase our comprehension, we conducted multi-method research that included the IAT test, a vignette study, and in-depth interviews at one university in the Netherlands. Our findings demonstrate the importance of unconscious stereotypes that create a divide between both male and female respondents. We explain how unconscious stereotypes permeate micro-political practices at the university under study. Consequently, we discuss whether our case represents a gendered organisation, which reproduces male organisational features in regard to recruitment and career progression. Our multi-method approach creates additional depth for our findings, reconfirming the importance of combining different data sources.

KEYWORDS

Academic careers; gender stereotypes; recruitment; multi-method research; employee diversity

1 . Introduction

Aiming for workforce diversity is generally considered to be a positive, inclusive approach that allows for individual differences over group-based differences while downplaying discrimination and disadvantages. The European Technology Assessment Network (ETAN) report (Osborn et al. 2000) concluded that the underrepresentation of women threatens the goals of science for achieving excellence and is wasteful and unjust. ‘Gender discrimination is a violation of human rights; the underrepresentation of women threatens excellence; and it is wasteful to educate and train young women scientists, but then not to use their skills in employment’ (ETAN Report 2000, 2). Organisations can benefit in a number of ways from diversity policies (see also Van den Brink and Brouns 2006; Hofhuis, van der Zee, and Otten 2008), but that does not mean that conflicts, problems, and dilemmas involved in implementing diversity policies do not exist (Kirton and Greene 2015), as we will illustrate.

Aspects of gender inequality in organisations and in universities, in particular, have drawn the attention of policymakers and researchers for many decades. Various perspectives and theories have been developed in order to approach, investigate, and explain gender inequality, such as the concept of the glass ceiling (Morrison, White, and van Velsor 1987), the socialisation processes in organisations favouring males (Daft 2012; Kaatz, Gutierrez, and Carnes 2014; Nielsen 2017), and impression-management tactics deployed by male employers (Bolino, Long, and Turnley 2016) and queen bees (Derks, van Laar, and Ellemers 2009; Derks et al. 2011). Statistical data reflecting the gender gap have been increasingly available (e.g. She Figures 2015; LNVH 2018), as are

gender- and diversity-oriented policies. These policies addressed not only diversity among staff but also among students and curricula. The appointment of chief diversity officers (CDOs) in various universities seemed to be a crucial step for expressing interest in diversity in academia.

Gender equality is one of the fundamental values of the European Commission (EU 2018). Despite constant efforts amongst stakeholders, the number of women in top positions continued to remain small. Particularly in the higher-education sector (e.g. European Commission 2009a, 2009b, 2015), we see that, at higher organisational levels, the percentage of women decreases, a phenomenon called the leaking pipeline. In the Netherlands, the percentage of female full professors has risen slowly to 18% in 2015, 19.3% in 2016, and 20.9% in 2017 (LNVH 2018). However, this percentage is still one of the lowest in Europe (European Commission 2015, 2018). In the Netherlands, the percentages differed between 30.1% (The Open University) and 12.6% (Eindhoven University of Technology) (LNVH 2018). With this current growth, the target (25%) set in the Lisbon Declaration will be reached in 2025, a critical mass of 35% in 2030, and an equal distribution in 2055. The Dutch former minister of education called the slowness of this development 'embarrassing' (Bussemaker 2015). The reasons for these low percentages lie in a variety of factors determining further career steps for women. Here, we use structural and institutional factors such as power relations and university governance (Teelken and Deem 2013), which have resulted in the persistent gap between policies and intentions stimulating diversity and gender equality and the actual situation.

We focussed on the move from associate to full professor level, as this remains the most difficult barrier amongst all the scientific disciplines. Between 1990 and 2017, the glass-ceiling index gradually decreased from 2.0–1.4 (LNVH 2018), indicating that the percentage of female associate professors is 1.4 times higher than the percentage of female full professors. A glass-ceiling index higher than one represents stagnation. Herein, we consider the glass ceiling to be the set of invisible barriers that hinder women's progression to higher positions (e.g. Morrison, White, and van Velsor 1987; Acker 2009; Sanders, Willemsen, and Millar 2009).

Previous studies in higher education (e.g. Van Engen, Bleijenbergh, and Paauwe 2008; Bleijenbergh et al. 2010; Nielsen 2016b) revealed that the reasons for this glass ceiling are various. At an institutional level, they arose from unsuitable policy programmes, at an (organisational) level, from general stereotypes and prejudices against women concerning mobility and recruitment (e.g. Goy et al. 2018), and at an individual level, they involved the perceived capacities, motivations, and experiences of women. Here, stereotypes included cognitive convictions regarding knowledge, ideas, and expectations of certain groups (Hamilton and Trolier 1986). Stereotypes are closely related to prejudices, where a group's specific characteristics are considered generally without taking individual differences into consideration (Eisinga and Scheepers 1989). We use the term *gender stereotypes* (Fiske 2000) to imply prejudices and convictions of specific behaviours, roles, and characteristics concerning men and women (Fiske and Stevens 1993).

Universities have an informal structure revealed through the daily practices, relationships, and behaviours of their members (e.g. Morley 1999). However, as Eddy, Ward, and Khwaja (2017, 5) explained, 'Yet, digging a bit deeper highlights that problems still exist numerically and structurally, especially when gender is analysed at microscopic levels'. We pursue Eddy's suggestion to 'dig deeper' and will use the concept of 'micro-political practices related to the recruitment and progression in higher education institutions' (O'Connor et al. 2017, 2), as more thoroughly explained in the following section. We have decided to focus on the current population of full professors as they participate in selection committees, have a great impact on appointment procedures, and can reflect on their own appointment procedures. We investigated the perceptions and experiences of both male and female full professors within one Dutch university and answer the following research question: *In what manner can implicit gender stereotypes explain the career mobility of women at a Dutch university?* Following the literature review, we explain our research methods, present the findings of our study, and discuss their implications before concluding the paper.

2 . Literature review

To develop a fuller understanding of gender stereotypes, we closely examined the informal characteristics of the university as an organisation, as well as the characteristics of individuals at the institution. Here, we present a theoretical framework developed with reference to literature on gender in academia and encompassing both types of characteristics as linked to micro-institutional practices.

A great variety of explanations has been offered for the lack of gender balance in higher academic positions (e.g. Nielsen 2016a; Smith 2017), varying from subtle gender inequalities to personal circumstances and the actual structure of academic work. Acker (1990, 2006) stated that organisations continuously reinforce a cultural image of the ideal employee as a loyal male with few obligations and commitments outside the workplace. In her well-known work, Acker identified five distinct processes through which the gendering of organisations takes place: (1) the construction of gendered divisions of employee tasks and responsibilities, acceptable employee behaviours, and hierarchical power relationships; (2) the construction of gendered symbols and images legitimising and reinforcing the aforementioned gender divisions; (3) gendered patterns of social interaction, sometimes represented in role patterns as dominance and repression; (4) the construction of gendered components of individual identity reflected in the gender-specific behaviour and subjective strivings of employees; and (5) the constant reproduction of an allegedly gender-neutral organisational logic structured around the male norm (Acker 1990).

In order to investigate gender stereotypes within micro-political practices (O'Connor et al. 2017), we will first examine the definition and background of these practices and then provide several examples of recent empirical findings. We will argue, in line with Acker (1990), that subtle assumptions about gender constitute an inherent element of how allegedly gender-neutral organisations and bureaucracies are structured. Acker explained that gender hierarchies are (re) produced in modern organisations through social processes of rationalisation and legitimisation, leading to 'organisational logics' with a gendered nature, including everything from job assessments and application procedures to pay scales and promotion practices. Universities do have affirmative policies and programmes to stimulate gender equality and may appear to be gender-neutral. However, in everyday practice, particularly in regard to the recruitment and selection of full professors, these organisations are not as gender-neutral as they seem.

Several empirical studies have reconfirmed that selection and recruitment in academia are gender-biased (e.g. Steinpreis, Anders, and Ritzke 1999; Moss-Racusin et al. 2012). Interestingly, Castilla and Benard (2010) demonstrated that even organisations that pride themselves as meritocracies ultimately encourage gender biases. Similarly, Teelken and Deem (2013) showed that new forms of governance (managerialism), rather than encouraging transparency and fairness through the output orientation, actually re-emphasise the existing, gender-biased status quo by allowing more-subtle forms of discrimination, for example, working less than full-time still works against female researchers in the long term. In addition, the work by Harford (2018) conducted in Ireland and based on interviews with 24 female full professors also demonstrated that, despite the advancement of female undergraduates and various gender-equity policies, the vast majority of professors in higher education continue to be men. Harford confirmed that organisational cultures and practices that appear to perpetuate such gender divisions, with only 19% female full professors, and gendered patterns of action require further investigation.

As the purpose of this paper is to investigate gender stereotypes at individual and organisational levels, within a context of alleged meritocracy, we frame our investigations within micro-political practices (O'Connor et al. 2017). These micro-political practices in higher education showed that the notion of excellence is used to obscure the practices of informal power in higher education (O'Connor and O'Hagan 2016). The work by O'Connor et al. contradicted the institutionalised belief that the evaluation and recruitment of staff are processes that are unaffected by the social characteristics of those who work with them or their relationships with others. The study explained that managerialism is 'an increasingly common ideology in higher education' resulting in an implicit,

normative assumption that 'decisions about recruitment/progression are or should be meritocratic' (4). Their study demonstrated that such beliefs do not hold. Drawing on data collected from qualitative interviews with 67 men and women from five countries, they revealed three types of micro-political practices that affect recruitment and progression in academia, revealing the importance of informal power. These are discussed below.

The first involves micro-political masculinist practices, e.g. the monastic image of the scientist and its tensions with family life. A study by Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2012) revealed that women spend more time taking care of child and home-related issues, whereas in academia, the ideology of the 'care-free zone' persisted (e.g. Lynch 2010; Harford 2018). In the US, El-Alayli, Hansen-Brown, and Ceynar (2018) highlighted the extra burden felt by female professors (full, associate, assistant), which was demonstrated in an evaluative and experimental study that found female professors, compared with their male counterparts, perceive greater work demands. One source of such demands was their students, who were found to be more likely to approach them with special requests since they foresaw a greater chance that their requests would be granted. Moreover, students exhibited greater negative emotional and behavioural reactions if the female professors denied their requests, and they were more likely to continue to plead their cases even after a denial. On the basis of interviews with female lecturers, Angervall (2018) also showed that several expressed that many hours spent teaching reduce the amount of time and energy needed for other career opportunities related to their academic positions. Leisyte's study (2016) supported the idea that balanced teaching research workloads improve research productivity, but that female respondents are less likely to experience such a 'balance'.

Fotaki (2013) provided an additional, alternative perspective. She elucidated why and how current diversity policies fail by investigating the underrepresentation of women in senior positions in academia by interviewing 23 women working in UK management and business schools. She used a theoretical framework that engages with debates concerning language, discourse, and the body, and developed a theory of 'disembodied symbolic order' to clarify the continued marginalisation and devaluation of women in academia. Her study (1251) showed how 'male norms and women's absence from symbolic representations' hinder female participation in academia on equivalent terms and referred, for example, to the 'imposter syndrome' (1267); women felt like imposters as they considered themselves left 'outside the dominant male symbolic order of academia' (1267).

The *second* type, micro-political relational practices (e.g. nepotism, sponsorship), refers to individual relationships with those in a powerful position, which were seen by both candidates and evaluators as important in influencing evaluations of the candidates' excellence, which is more likely for men. The relationship, rather than any objective assessments of the applicant's merit, was considered crucial. For example, Van den Brink and Benschop (2014), in a study of recruitment and selection in Dutch academia, observed subtle practices of 'gender homophily', meaning that male academics are not fully aware of who is encouraged to apply for positions and whose reputations are boosted by senior colleagues.

The *third* practice involves 'local fit', referring to intellectual or academic inbreeding and the idea that new members should be selected from within an internally dominant group (see also Harford 2018). In the context of these micro-political practices, we want to emphasise the recruitment and appointment processes of female full professors as explained in the introduction. An overview of the three micro-political practices and their meaning and consequences as discussed in various literature sources is provided in Table 1.

3. Research methods

Our study involved using multiple methods, including in-depth interviews, an implicit association test, and a vignette study during data collection. We collected data amongst 14 full professors at a Dutch university, mainly at the faculty of social sciences (10 of the 14). This university is amongst the group with a higher percentage of female professors, i.e. about 20% in 2017 (LNVH 2018).

Table 1. Overview of literature, based on O'Connor et al. (2017).

Micro-political practices	Meaning	Consequences
(1) Masculine practices	Refers to the 'monastic' image of the scientist	The university is considered a 'care-free zone' where women do not fit in (Lynch 2010; Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2012; Fotaki 2013; Harford 2018). Women are still considered caregivers and, thereby, more approachable by students (Angervall 2018; El-Alayli, Hansen-Brown, and Ceynar 2018).
(2) Relational practices	Relationship, rather than objective assessments of the applicant's merit, is considered crucial	Through nepotism and sponsorship, objective assessment fails (Van den Brink and Benschop 2014)
(3) Local fit practices	New members should be selected from an 'internal dominant group'	Academic/intellectual inbreeding and selective recruitment (e.g. Steinpreis, Anders, and Ritzke 1999; Castilla and Benard 2010; Teelken and Deem 2013; Moss-Racusin et al. 2014)

What makes this combined approach noteworthy is that it enables us to see how unconscious gender stereotypes affect the judgment, appreciation, and selection of newly appointed professors. (See Table 2 for an overview of the respondents).

3.1 . In-depth interviews

We conducted in-depth interviews with 14 full professors. To research the extent to which the respondents were aware of gender stereotypes, we interviewed the professors about their own experiences with gender during their careers and when they were members of selection committees for the appointments of full professors. We also asked questions about gender balance in the sciences and at their university, specifically, and successful and unsuccessful measures implemented recently. The interviews were analysed using open, axial, and closed coding. The third author of this paper performed the first stage of analysis in a particularly open, inductive manner. Once the focus of the research sharpened, the first author analysed all interviews a second time, which revealed more profound patterns in the data, including a paradox of adaptability to male norms, as explained in the results section. Two of the three authors individually translated the interview transcripts from Dutch into English and, in the case of discrepancies (e.g. 'bragging' versus 'boasting'), reached a consensus.

Table 2. List of respondents, their features, scores and responses.

Respondents	Research methods						
	IAT			Vignettes		Interviews	
Code	Gender	Gender association	Score	Preference male/ female features	CV male/ female	Opinion about the % of female full professors	Glass ceiling
R4m	Male	Little to no association	0.01	Male	Female	Low	Yes, but also for men
R13f	Female		0.03	Male	Female	Low	
R6m	Male		0.07	Male	Female	Low	
R14m	Male	Slight to moderate association	0.26	Male	Female	Low	Different opinions
R7f	Female		0.31	Male	Female	Low	
R1f	Female		0.35	Female	Female	Low	
R12m	Male		0.37	Male	Male	Fine, many women	
R10m	Male	Moderate to strong association	0.61	Female	Female	Low	No, but women have to perform better
R5m	Male		0.62	Male	Female	Low	
R8m	Male		0.68	Female	Female	Low	
R2m	Male		0.68	Female	Female	Fine	
R3f	Female		0.71	Male	Female	Low	
R9m	Male		Strong association	0.94	Male	Male	
R11f	Female	0.98		Male	Female	Low	

3.2 . *Implicit association test (IAT)*

In order to investigate implicit gender stereotypes amongst full professors, we used the IAT, an implicit association test, in this case, focused on gender and careers (Levinson and Young 2010). The IAT is an online test that intends to establish personal discrepancies in associations. We used the test for this research to determine whether male and female professors hold implicit gender stereotypes (Greenwald et al. 2002). The Gender/Career IAT examines whether the respondents, in this case, male and female professors, associate a career with men rather than with women (Levinson and Young 2010). This IAT requests that respondents link words that describe a career and words that focus on family with either male or female names, thereby allowing us to examine whether respondents make implicit associations between men and careers, on the one hand, and between women and family, on the other (Levinson and Young 2010). A low IAT score means that the respondent does not demonstrate a particular unconscious gender bias. We expected that a low score would coincide with fewer explicit gender biases amongst the respondents and vice versa.

To ensure the validity of the IAT, a test round was held with two random respondents. In this way, ambiguities of the test were filtered (Robson 2002). In order to avoid any socially desirable answers and to increase the reliability of the research, the topic of the test was kept secret from the respondents. The respondents were told that the research focuses on diversity in talent and backgrounds of employees within the organisation and not specifically on implicit gender stereotypes.

3.3 . *Vignette study*

A vignette study was conducted as part of the qualitative research. This is a method designed to elicit people's perceptions, opinions, and behaviours (Barter and Renold 1999) and to make it possible to generate sensitive information in an indirect and non-confrontational way (Jenkins et al. 2010). A vignette study enabled a comparison between the perceptions of male and female professors by studying responses to brief, hypothetical stories describing scenarios or situations (Barter and Renold 1999). Our research examined two crucial moments within the appointment procedure as a full professor by providing the respondents with (1) profile sketches and, subsequently, (2) two resumes. Concerning the profile sketch, we asked respondents to choose between typically feminine and masculine features and link these to the full professorship. Typically, masculine features involved being ambitious, self-sufficient, and independent versus typically feminine features such as sympathetic, understanding, and compassionate. Subsequently, we used two fictitious descriptions of vacancies and resumes, one describing a male and the other, a female. Both candidates had equitable qualifications but with small subtle differences. We asked the respondents to express a preference for either the male or female candidate.

Our combined research methods added to the richness of our findings, which will be presented in the rich and complex picture drawn below.

4. Findings

We present our findings beginning with an overview of the respondents, arranged according to their IAT scores and their perceptions concerning the potential candidates with the help of the vignettes. Table 2 combines the three modes of data collection. As the IAT scores show, the opinions of the respondents with regard to the existence of a glass ceiling vary substantially; some find that a glass ceiling exists but that it also affects men, while others state that a glass ceiling does not exist and that women just need to outperform men.

A low IAT score means that the respondent does not demonstrate a particular unconscious gender bias. We expected that a low score would coincide with fewer explicit gender biases amongst the respondents and vice versa. However, our findings were not as straightforward as we expected. Whereas 12 of the 14 respondents considered the percentage of female professors as being too

low, the majority of the respondents (despite their IAT score) preferred masculine features above feminine ones, whereas when provided with the resumes, nearly all respondents chose the female candidate. We first present the findings from the interviews, after which we relate them to IAT scores in the next section.

On the basis of the analysis of our interviews, we discovered the extensive impact of organisational culture as an ‘umbrella concept’ (1) and, within that, three types of micro-political practices: (2.1) practices with regard to *gender-balancing policies* and their (lack of) implementation and appreciation, (2.2) practices related to recruitment and selection policies of full professors, and (2.3) practices related to work – life tensions (see [Table 3](#) for an overview). The ways in which professors act out these practices by and large reinforce gender stereotypes on all three aspects, as our findings illustrate.

Below we provide the main findings of our analyses with illustrative quotations.

A more general overview and in-depth analysis of the data (mainly the interviews) discovered four interrelated factors for the unbalanced population of full professors in regard to gender, as perceived by our respondents.

4.1 . Organisational culture

The first factor involves the *organisational culture* at the university. All respondents considered the organisational culture to be dominated by masculinity. When explaining what this masculinity involves, respondents often referred to terminology used in Hofstede’s (1998) definition: ‘power-oriented, and characterized by self-reliance, independence, hierarchy, performance and competition’.

Thus, the organisational culture at the university can be seen as a typical ‘old-boys’ network’ (R3f), ‘male dominated’ (R8m) and with a very strong ‘macho culture’ (R11f). ‘As a group of men, without any women present, we still behave like a group of sexist macho men from the fifties’ (R9m). Both men and women cultivated a general idea about what is to be expected from a full professor (R1f), with a certain amount of competitive behaviour that is less likely to be expected for women (R3f); ‘the competitive culture, you do not expect it at a university, but it means that you are

Table 3. Overview of our findings.

Organisational culture	Micro-political masculine practices	Outcomes: reinforced gender stereotypes
Typically masculine	Practices related to gender-balancing policies	- The women who ‘play the game’ according to the existing system are those who are promoted fast and will, in turn, select women who also know how to ‘play the game’
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Macho culture • Old-boys’ networks • Competition • Output driven (meritocracy) • Managerialism • Play the game • Friendliness is not appreciated • Long workdays • Sacrifice is required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No structural commitment to positive gender-enhancement policies • Ambiguous and mixed appreciation of previous and existing policies by individual professors 	
	Practices related to recruiting and selecting full professors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The existing informal networks reinforce nepotism because preferred candidates are selected based on the homophily of their sponsors. - Output-driven culture is based on fierce competition and favours managerial and leadership features of the candidate
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of transparency • Preferred candidates are known beforehand → sponsoring and nepotism → inbreeding and local fit • Homophily • Cherry-picking between output-driven (meritocracy) and managerialism 	
	Practices related to work–life tensions	- Women are simply less interested in further career progress
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women are not willing to work full-time • No room/time for family life • Women are not fully committed 	

constantly being made accountable, often for things you cannot influence. If this does not appeal to you, such an environment is nothing for you ... ' (R3f). It seemed that women are less willing to take risks or pursue their own interests (R7f).

Interestingly, the respondents tend to cope in different ways with this typical masculine culture. Only a few found that there is no need for adaptation to this culture (R10m, R13f). One female professor and head of department stated that: 'Some women adapt themselves, but I see many others that are very capable of finding ways to sustain and maintain their own values and their own ways of working and not to go along with the male bragging' (R13f).

Nevertheless, a substantial group found that males as well as females are sustaining the masculine culture. Women who 'survived' and are succeeding in the masculine culture have adapted themselves (R1f, R7f, R9m, R12m, R14m), thereby maintaining the masculine culture (R2m). The women who managed to join this game, 'they are the ones that get promoted quickly' (R11f). 'In order to become a full professor, you have to participate, join in, and consequently, sustain the existing masculine culture' (R11). Full professors should be able to cope with competition, which is stimulated even more by the current emphasis on managerialism and the output orientation (R2m). Similarly, respondent R10m acknowledged that women adapt to what is expected of them in their role. For example, for a full professorship, they have to work very long hours (R1f). Another female professor added that she 'stopped trying to be too friendly, like pouring coffee for everybody' (R3f). The persistence of this masculine culture implies that women have to learn how to play the game of power, because 'you have to be very good at that, want and dare to play the game and know how to do so. Particularly in a university, a sort of bizarre bureaucratic power organisation. For men it is easier to see their work as a game' (R6m).

Consequently, when comparing male and female career opportunities, a female professor added to this:

No, of course it is unfair. But men can get away with far more issues than women. Women are much easier criticised when they show negative or incorrect behaviour. There are a large number of male professors about whom I think, how on earth did you get this position? But they get away with it. Perhaps because they cover for each other (R7f)

When discussing the positions of the female full professors, several male respondents stated that women simply have to perform better than men. In other words, to be eligible for a professorship, they had to perform significantly better than their male counterparts (R2m, R5m, R6m, R8m). 'The women I know who managed to become full professors paid many sacrifices to achieve such a position ... They have to be fully dedicated and sacrifice their complete private life to their profession' (R6m). Or to put it more strongly: 'Females have to be tougher than men; women have to adapt to the dominant culture, which is perhaps very hard' (R2m).

However, when women tried to adapt themselves, they have to balance on a very thin line, as their adaptation makes them vulnerable and more liable to be criticised. Some found that female professors go too far in this (R8m), as they 'behave like someone they are effectually not, using a kind of charade to show their abilities. By definition, you are less good at something you pretend' (R1f).

These mixed responses resulted in a complicated paradox because it seemed that female professors have to adapt themselves, but if they do so they are criticised for their modifications. This made them even more stigmatised: 'We like a female full professor if she is good. But if she behaves very bossy and assertive, then we as men dislike that. We [would] rather have docile women than the ones that want to teach us a lesson' (R9m). 'Part of the male professors and executive board find it difficult to deal with smart women. They do not want to be overruled; that pisses them off; they cannot handle that' (R9m).

Interestingly, the viewpoints of respondents indicate inconsistency concerning the typically feminine aspects of organisational behaviour. Some of these aspects such as social commitment, compassion, friendliness (R12m), and sustaining relationships and aiming for consensus (R3f, R7f) were considered less relevant for a full professorship (R1f). However, other respondents agreed

that gender stereotypes can work to the advantage of men as well as women (R12m, R14m): 'Nobody wants to have a "troublemaker" as a colleague', and typical female or motherly aspects can be friendly and appealing. More generally speaking: 'I see so many different sorts of full professors, from arrogant pricks to very sociable, amiable people, who are very empathic. I find it very hard. I focus myself on the friendly ones, the empathic ones. And if someone is a real prick, arrogant, boasting alpha male, or female, then I am done with that. I do not cooperate with someone like that' (R6m).

4.2. Micro-political masculine practices

4.2.1. Practices related to gender-balancing policies

Closely related to the organisational culture, with a more institutional focus, we can distinguish the second factor, *practices of gender-balancing policies*. Our findings reveal that gender equality is an important issue at the university, at least on paper. This is demonstrated through the 'institutional plan 2015–2020', which stated that the university is supposedly 'diversity-ready'. Gender-equality practices involved the Charter 'Talent to the Top', and the appointment of a chief diversity officer (who was unable to be interviewed for our study). This CDO focused particularly on ethnic diversity (R1f, R11f).

The respondents were generally aware of these national, institutional, and faculty policies, but their opinions concerning these policies varied considerably. They saw few genuine plans for increasing the percentage of female professors: '*It may be my mistake, but I don't see them. And the only actual plan* (meaning that every faculty could appoint one female professor every two years, the so-called FMU policy) *was abolished last year*' (R1f). Several respondents were quite positive about this FMU policy (R2m, R14m); one respondent (R9m, former dean) explained that he actually initiated this programme and finds it successful as it involves an instrument that forces others to select women as full professors. Two female full professors gained their full professorship status through this policy and, therefore, profited from it directly (R3f, R7f).

Disadvantages of such programmes were that they could work against women as it may seem as if they are advantaged for their gender only (R3f, R5m). Another respondent (R10m) found this FMU a 'strange concept', as it involves positive discrimination, which makes a distinctive status that he considers inappropriate. He found that both males and females should be evaluated in exactly the same manner. He generally disliked the idea of positive discrimination, e.g. in the form of special tenure tracks for women, which he considered as putting too much pressure on a specific person (R10m). He also gave the example of the protests at the University of Groningen against the Rosalind Franklin scholarship (R10m). Likewise, initiating the FMU was like 'throwing a stick in the "hen house"; it created a fight amongst the eligible women and may have damaged their careers' (R9m). This was one of the reasons for abolishing the programme after about six years.

More broadly speaking, the separate activities that were intended to stimulate women's careers did not help to solve the problem as a whole, as they did not do justice to the complexity of the situation (R1f, R4m, R14m). Another respondent added to this by stating, 'We would like more women, but if this has to be effectuated in our organisational hierarchy, it is suddenly very difficult for these men. They rarely choose the candidate they originally wanted according to the formal policies' (R14m).

Consequently, in general, gender policies seemed to lack vision and clarity, and they were insufficiently transparent (R1f, R6m). The respondents expressed that the options offered are too loosely coupled with the organisational politics within the university: 'They are part of a cloud of goodness; it is "not done" to be against such policies, but whether they will actually reduce the gender mechanisms remains to be seen' (R6m). In line with this, two respondents (R2m, R10m) agreed that both female and male full professors are treated equally: one explains, 'I expect the same from my female as well as from my male colleagues' (R10m).

Only one respondent found that 'a real solution would be using a quota' in order to force the university to appoint only women or to promote every female associate professor to full professor status until they have reached a certain percentage (R4m).

4.2.2. Practices related to recruiting and selecting full professors

Nearly all respondents (1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14) explained that, although the application procedures are officially open, in reality, they are highly influenced by political interests and insights, and they are part of organisational politics (R6m). 'I am at my third chair (full professor position), and none of these procedures were openly organised' (R4m). There are several steps in the procedure vulnerable to inbreeding; for example, sometimes the profile is drawn specifically for a potential candidate, either male or female, and the members of the selection committee have to be determined (R7f). Both steps have a significant influence on the outcome.

Committee members were vulnerable and open to personal preferences and often select someone who was like themselves. In about three-quarters of the procedures, the committee already knew the intended candidate (R9m). Very often, the intended candidate was already identified in advance (R2m, R5m, R8m, R9m). Members of the committee had considerable influence and, frequently, a preferred candidate had already been acknowledged (R7f, R9m). It sometimes happened that committee members had a clear agenda and ensured that men progress and were consequently appointed (R11f).

Of course, there are basic qualifications candidates were required to have (R14m), but apart from that, a lot depended on the composition of the committee. Unconscious gender stereotypes played a role during selection procedures because there was always something personal and subjective about these procedures (R2m, R3f, R8m, R10m), and political forces play a role (R13f), 'as a whole amount of organisational politics is involved with the appointment of full professors' (R6m), but not necessarily personal forces (R8m).

R1f explained that implicit ideas about what you expect from a candidate clearly play a role. 'If someone holds a talk very confidently and shows his ambitions and leadership capacities, then we are eager to opt for such a candidate. At such a point, research output seems less relevant' (R1f), and it seemed that the stereotype of a full professor remains an 'elderly, grey-haired male' (R3f).

It is likely that unconscious patterns play a role. People may deliberately be in favour of a female candidate, but in the dynamics of a conversation, people may be under influence, and at the end, they may choose someone they did not want in the first place. (R11f)

About a woman, they say: 'she did it well', about a male, 'he is good'. (R3f). Interestingly, our vignette study similarly showed that, although the respondents preferred the female candidate of equal quality to the male, when asked about typical characteristics (e.g. being sympathetic, understanding, and compassionate), they preferred the male capacities (e.g. ambitious, self-sufficient, and independent).

4.2.3. Practices related to work–life tensions

Several male respondents mentioned that women are often not willing or unable to work full-time (R12m, R8m), and it is 'difficult to work part-time in a full professorship' (R2m). 'If you say, I have a child and want to work 80%, that is not appreciated' (R11f). Having children involves an interruption in a career. For men, it is easier to distance themselves from their children (R2m, R9m); the combination of work with family is, for women, still more difficult than for men (R3m). A high percentage of female full professors do not have children. 'In our management team, all female full professors did not have children, and there is a reason for that' (R8m) is closely related to the statement that women have to make more sacrifices than men.

Other causes for the lack of women in positions as full professors are mentioned as well by the male respondents who stated the time factor (R9m, R10m, R14m): 'It simply takes time to change' (R10m). Another considered it as a capacity problem: 'There are simply not enough vacancies'

(R7f). In addition, there seemed to be less interest by women: 'Do women really want to become a full professor?' (R10m): 'Men seem more focused and more career-oriented in general' (R9m).

4.3 . Outcomes

As part of a masculine culture, each of the three practices has reinforced gendered stereotypes in various ways. First, regarding practices related to gender-balancing policies, we found that women who 'play the game', so to speak, according to the rules of the current system have been readily promoted and, in turn, will prefer to work with women who play the game by following those rules as well. Second, about practices related to the recruitment and selection of full professors, existing informal networks reinforce nepotism as successful candidates continue to be selected based on the homophily of their sponsors. Such output-driven culture is based on fierce competition and favours the managerial as well as leadership-related features of candidates. Last, concerning practices related to work-life tensions, we observed that, according to the male respondents, women are simply less interested than men in career advancement (see [Table 3](#)).

4.4 . Combining the data sources

The differences in IAT scores did not coincide with the gender of the respondents. However, when we grouped the respondents according to their IAT scores, which represent the extent to which they revealed unconscious stereotypes, we did find several interesting contradictions in their opinions.

One group of respondents scored higher for gender stereotypes, meaning that they perceived a stronger relationship between, for example, the word *men* and the word *career* when reflecting on masculine practices. This same group also considered the university as a strong macho culture (R9m), where working part-time is not an option (R11f). In contrast, the respondents who scored lower on these stereotypes emphasised that the women who succeed in the masculine culture can do so only because they have adapted themselves, consequently preserving this culture (R1, R7, R12, R14).

Concerning the relational practices, it is remarkable that respondents with a strong stereotype considered the selection and application procedures for full professors as gender-biased. They explained that personal preferences play a clear role, that the ideal candidate is already identified, and that selection is subjective, whereas those with a weaker stereotype worry more about the lack of constructive gender-balancing policies. Regarding the so-called local fit practices, we saw that the stronger stereotyped respondents stated that women have to outshine men ('they have to perform extra well'); the respondents with weaker stereotypes focussed more on the typical soft skills (sustaining long-term relationships), which are considered less relevant for a full professor [Table 4](#).

5 . Conclusions and discussion

We can draw three conclusions on the basis of our analysis. First, our study reveals that although the respondents considered gender diversity to be important and expressed their concern about the lack of women full professors, when questioned more closely, it appears that the full professors' unconscious preferences and prejudices play a role leading in typical gender stereotypes. This implies a contradiction between conscious and unconscious stereotypes. Our IAT scores showed that unconscious gender stereotypes are clearly present amongst approximately half the respondents, both men and women. We found, in particular, four factors that hinder the advancement of female professors at one of the main universities in the Netherlands. We discovered the extensive impact of organisational culture, which is defined, in our case, as a masculine and competitive culture (1) like an 'umbrella concept' and, within that, three types of micro-political practices: (2.1) practices related to gender-balancing policies and their (lack of) implementation and appreciation, (2.2)

Table 4 . Combined overview of findings.

Micro-political practices	Meaning	Respondents with a strong stereotype scored higher on the IAT, meaning that they think more in stereotypes	Respondents with a weak stereotype scored lower on the IAT, meaning that unconsciously they think less in stereotypes
(1) Masculine practices	Refers to the 'monastic' image of the scientist	They still see the university as a strong macho culture; 'We still behave like a group of sexist macho men from the fifties' R9m. (R3f, R8m, R11f). Working part-time is not possible (R11f); men are better at focussing themselves on their work (R2m, R3m, R9m).	In contradiction, the respondents who scored lower on the IAT find that women who 'survived' and succeed in the masculine culture have adapted themselves (R1f, R7f, R12m, R14m) therefore maintaining the masculine culture.
(2) Relational practices	Relationship rather than any objective assessments of the applicant's merit being crucial	Committee members are vulnerable and open to personal preferences and often select candidates who are like themselves. There is always something personal, subjective about these procedures (R2m, R3f, R5m, R8m, R10m)	Policy activities that intend to stimulate women's' career do not help to solve the problem as a whole, as they do not do justice to the complexity of the situation (R1f, R4m, R14m)
(3) Local fit	New members should be selected from an 'internal dominant group'	To be eligible for a professorship, women have to perform especially well (R2m, R5m, R8m)	Some of these aspects such as social commitment, compassion, friendliness (R12m), sustaining relationships, and aiming for consensus (R7f) are considered less relevant for a full professorship (R1f), although friendly colleagues are appreciated (R12m, R14m)

practices related to the recruitment and selection of full professors, and (2.3) practices related to work–life tensions.

Second, the main contribution of our paper is related to the second and third factors: the nature of the practices of gender-balancing policies and the way application procedures for full professorships are conducted. Gender stereotypes play a particular role when judging candidates for the position of full professor (Van den Brink and Brouns 2006). Whereas the members of these selection committees strive for objectivity and transparency, they admit that they are unconsciously open to using stereotypical gender considerations when having to make a selection between equally qualified candidates (Kaatz, Gutierrez, and Carnes 2014). In reality, selection procedures are not as open as they should be in a formal sense. We think that these implicit gender stereotypes hinder the possibilities for women to obtain full professorships as sustainable careers and, therefore, deserve further consideration. This consequently demonstrates a reproduction of an allegedly gender-neutral organisational logic structured around the male norm (Acker 1990), for example, through inbreeding. It also explains the lack of success of gender-balancing policies.

Third, our study revealed several subtle but crucial differences between the stronger and weaker stereotyped respondents. Most interesting is that those with a stronger stereotype still consider the university to be a male-dominated organisation, while those with a weaker stereotype emphasise the adaptability of women to sustain the masculine culture. It seems that, generally, respondents who exhibited stronger stereotypes suggested that the university's being an institution and employer is the major cause of its gendered-ness as an organisation. By contrast, the other group indicated that masculinity's predominance was caused by women who had adapted to accommodate masculine practices, which adds to the complexity of the sex and gender division that refers not only to biological but social differences among people in their relational practices. Subsequently, those practices have resulted in the reduced acceptance of typically social and relational aspects of organisations in terms of the local fit. Both our vignette study and the interviews demonstrated that social commitment, friendliness, and compassion are considered less-relevant capacities for a full

professor. Consequently, our findings re-emphasise the statements made by O'Connor et al. (2017) by demonstrating that recruitment of staff is significantly influenced by the social characteristics of the existing staff members, instead of the so-called notion of excellence (Van den Brink and Benschop 2014; O'Connor and O'Hagan 2016).

All in all, opportunities for future research should include the sustainability of the masculine culture. Even if the percentage of women rises in a certain organisation, invisible barriers may prevent the development of talented women to their fullest extent. We believe our study on micro-political practices can be considered as an additional step to advance further research in this field. Of course, a few limitations to our study deserve attention, including that our investigation had a small sample size and targeted at only one faculty within one university. Furthermore, our use of an interpretative approach prevents our findings from being generalised to other situations.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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